

Chris Fish
JrCOSTEP – Summer 2005
Illinois State University
Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation
Bethel, Alaska- Alaska Area IHS

This summer I worked for the Indian Health Service in Bethel, Alaska as a JRCOSTEP. I



found out about the JRCOSTEP program at my school, Illinois State University. I decided that the JRCOSTEP program would provide me with a rare and fulfilling experience after talking to my professor, Dr. Byrns, who formerly worked for the Indian Health Service.

In Bethel, I worked at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation's (YKHC) Office of Environmental Health and Engineering (OEHE), which serves the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. The service area is about the size of the

state of Oregon and serves 48 villages. Due to the large area and the conditions in rural Alaska, the most common methods of travel are airplane, boat, and snow machine. Most of the time I traveled by plane, which allowed me to view some of the most beautiful wilderness anywhere in the world.

Working in Bethel proved to be a very rewarding experience in many ways. I had the opportunity to work with primarily two Native Alaskan groups, the Athabascans and the Yup'ik Eskimos. Working for these Native Alaskan groups was quite enjoyable, and I found everyone who I talked with to be very kind and helpful. While in one village, I even had the unique opportunity to attend a Native Dance. Much of what I learned this summer, I learned from the people in the villages where I worked.

I was able to learn a lot about Environmental Health in Rural Alaska from the staff at the Bethel office who proved to be quite knowledgeable and helpful when I had questions. In addition to the reward of working with such great people, I gained a lot of knowledge through my work duties that can only be attained through hands-on



experience. One of these duties was operating the EPA Certified Drinking Water Microbiology Laboratory. In the Microbiology Laboratory we tested water samples for the presence of coliform bacteria. Another interesting experience was when I worked on rabies investigations and vaccinations. At the Bethel office we conducted rabies investigations following any episode when someone was bitten, or a case of rabies was suspected. I became a Certified Lay Vaccinator through the state of Alaska, and vaccinated over 530 dogs during my time in Bethel. In addition to my Microbiology Lab duties, and rabies duties, I performed environmental health surveys. These surveys included water system surveys, sewage system surveys, village health clinic surveys, and solid waste disposal surveys.

My primary project for the summer was planning and overseeing the installation of water meters at commercial sites in Rural Utility Cooperative (RUC) villages. The goal of installing the water meters is to improve the sustainability of the water systems by charging for actual water usage, and thus gain more steady revenue. By improving the sustainability of the water systems, the overall health of the villages should improve. Additionally, money that may have been spent replacing under-maintained water systems can be utilized in other areas critical to preserving the health and culture of the communities. My main challenge during this project dealt with the logistics of getting all of the supplies to the villages. Due to the fact that everything must go by boat or plane, something as simple as buying some pipe can be significantly more expensive than in the lower 48 states.

I am very proud to have been able to work for the Indian Health Service in Bethel, Alaska. The remoteness of rural Alaska presents many issues that I may have never encountered anywhere else as an Environmental Health professional. Having the opportunity to work through these issues has provided me with skills that will help significantly in the future when I face obstacles. The JRCOSTEP program has given me the best possible internship experience. I would highly recommend Alaska as a JRCOSTEP site to any Environmental Health student with a desire to learn a lot in an area where very few people ever get to go.